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ABSTRACT

For an analysis of real-world writing, a researcher picked annual reports since they are written for stockholders, financial advisers, and "the competition." Annual reports are essentially "puff pieces," documents written by company people aiming to please the stockholders. Because of the varied audience, the narrative section, the largest and most important prose section of these documents, was chosen for analysis. Thirty reports were examined--10 picked by financial magazines as "best of the year," 10 picked as "worst of the year," and 10 chosen at random from the Fortune 500 list. An analytic method came from an examination of other reports which allowed pinpointing 32 characteristics important to understanding what these documents were made of--22 syntactic and stylistic features, and 10 rhetorical features. After the documents were scanned and put into a readable format, the "Correct Grammar" computer program was used to provide figures on the total number of words, average sentence and paragraph length, possible passive voice, and syllables per hundred words. All 30 narratives were read for the rhetorical analysis. Testing the data using a modified t-test, significant differences were found in the variables between the successful and average groups in only two places; data analysis suggests that 68.1% of the time the groups do not vary. Figures gathered in this study could be used to characterize those rhetorical and syntactic characteristics to business writing students, and in turn, these students could use the figures to examine their own writing to determine its "fingerprint." (NKA)

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A Syntactical and Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Annual Reports

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Although hardly a mechanic, I have always been fascinated by the way things are put together. Building soap-box cars, changing spark plugs in my car, putting together toys on Christmas Eve were things I enjoyed, if they weren't too complicated.

It should not be surprising, then, that I would be fascinated by real-world writing and the way it is put together, for it was to me a blend of my fascination with both how things work and how language works, another continuing interest of mine.

For my analysis, I picked annual reports since they were written for stockholders, a general audience of lay persons, although, certainly, more specialized readers included security analysts and other financial advisers, and, of course, the competition.

Annual reports are interesting, real-world documents since they are essentially "puff pieces," documents usually written by company people aiming to please, and read by eager stockholders anxious to find how their money is being spent, what new products or services the company has added, and, of course, what the bottom line is.

Because of the varied audience, the narrative section, the

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largest, and, in some ways, the most important prose section of these documents, was the section I chose to analyze.

Of course, I had to have some criteria for selecting these documents in order to be able to generalize about their syntactic and rhetorical "nature." When I found out that several financial mass circulation magazines have "best of the year" and "worst of the year" contests, I struck upon the strategy that I would select ten reports from the "best of the year," ten from the "worst of the year," and ten from not on either list, but chosen at random from the Fortune 500 list. That gave me thirty reports to examine, a good enough sampling to generalize about the style of these important documents in what I called the successful, unsuccessful and an average group.

Of course, I then had to come up with both a method and a set of features that would entail the basis of my analysis. To do that, I studied twenty to thirty other reports to get the flavor of just what the prose "fingerprints" were for these reports. In the end, I came up with thirty-two characteristics I thought were important to understanding just what these documents were made of: twenty-two syntactic and stylistic features, and ten rhetorical features. These, then, were my thirty-two variables.

The syntactic and stylistic features included factors like sentence length, paragraph length, t-unit length, the presence of passive voice, three types of clauses, the relative frequency of three-word nominalizations, subject-verb interruption, types of transitions, multiple prepositional phrases, non-human

grammatical subjects, infinitives, coordinated sentences, and the presence of be and has constructions.

In my preliminary rhetorical analysis, I discovered that there were ten fairly predictable schemes used, things like rhetorical questions, balanced sentences, inverted sentences, permissible sentence fragments, negative-positive restatements, isolation, repetition, convoluted sentences, anticipatory constructions, and rhetorical positioning. Of course, I expected not to find too many of these schemes since too many would destroy their rhetorical effect.

Yet, I needed a central focus, something to prove or refute. I settled on the hypothesis that there were stylistic differences between and among the groups, that the successful group would have a different stylistic "fingerprint" than the average and unsuccessful group.

What I needed now was some way to examine all that prose in an accurate way. I settled on a tact that would make the best use of computer-aided analysis since I had over a million and two hundred and fifty thousand bytes of text to analyze. After I scanned the documents and put them in a readable format, I used the program "Correct Grammar" to give me figures on the total number of words, average sentence length, paragraph length, possible passive voice, and syllables per hundred words. To spot uses of be and has, and the infinitive phrases using to, I used the Oxford University Press Concordance Maker. I gathered data on the other variables by following the laws of scientific sampling for such variables as t-unit length, words per finite,

nonfinite and special clauses, the relative frequency of subject-verb interruption, transitional markers, long prepositional phrases, non-human grammatical subjects, and coordinate sentences.

To analyze for the rhetorical variables I read all thirty narratives looking for the presence of ten rhetorical sentences like balanced sentences, rhetorical questions, rhetorical repetition, and anticipatory constructions.

What I had then was a whole lot of data that I had to somehow analyze in an acceptable way. That meant, of course, statistical analysis. Statistical analysis, among other things, tells people what the chances are that two figures have differences that are just due to chance or whether their differences are meaningful. In other words, there may be something going on. Of course, most statistical analysis is based on the old Bell Curve most of us have been hearing about most of our professional careers.

Testing the data using a modified t-test, a way of seeing how two groups compare to each other statistically, I found that there were significant differences in the variables between the successful and unsuccessful groups in four places, and there were significant differences in the variables between the successful and average groups in two places, and there was one significant difference between the successful and average group. So my statistical study showed that although not many, there were differences between groups.

Of course, while that is interesting information, as

composition teachers, it doesn't tell us much. We need to see if indeed the differences were related to each other in any way. Statisticians use a test called the Pearson Correlation Coefficient to see if these differences mean anything in terms of each other. Careful analysis revealed that while there were many correlation within each group, there were only two correlations were the same for two of the groups. First, in both the successful and unsuccessful groups, the number of words per special clause, correlated with the relative frequency of special subordinate clauses per t-unit, which seems to indicate that when special clauses appear they appear to increase in length in those two groups. But such was not the case for the variables for the relative frequency and the number of words of the nonfinite and finite clauses (the other two clauses) which did not correlate in the other groups. The correlation of the two variables that showed up in the successful and unsuccessful do not in the average group. Second, the other correlation was also between the successful and unsuccessful groups where the relative frequency of finite clauses per t-unit correlated with the relative frequency of nonfinite subordinate clauses per t-unit.

In sum, the data analysis suggests that 68.1% of the time the groups do not vary (15 out of 22) in any significant way and no two syntactical variables correlated among the three groups. Without sophisticated statistical analysis, it would seem "reasonable" to conclude that a number of the variables would very probably correlate. We may think, for instance, that

the number of words per t-unit would correlate with the relative frequency of sentences where at least one verb is passive, but that didn't turn out to be the case. These examples point to the ability of statistics to transcend wrongful "common sense" and get to the real similarities and differences among a set of figures.

The t-test of the rhetorical variables showed that no significant differences existed among the groups. The correlation analysis also revealed that there were no significant differences between groups.

How clean are the data? Are there other figures that could be used as comparisons? In other words, do other people who have analyzed the same type of prose come up with similar figures? Yes, they did. Francis and Kucera gathered similar figures for words per sentence and passive voice. Paul and Rosner came up with similar numbers for sentence length although they were analyzing slightly different kind of prose. Broadhead and Freed, examining business proposals, cite similar figures for words per t-unit and words per paragraph (148-149). It appears, then, that when data are available in comparable types of writing on the variables I examined, my figures and theirs are similar.

So what does all this mean? What good is it anyway?

First, we have data that helps to fingerprint the syntactic and rhetorical characteristics of annual reports. We know how much passive voice to expect, how long the sentences and paragraphs are, how long the t-units are, what kind of use the

writers make of rhetorical schemes, just to name a few of the bits of information gained from the analysis. In my business writing classes, students often ask how much passive voice is too much? How long should sentences be? How many transitions does a business document need? Now I have that kind of data. In teaching business writing, that makes it possible for us to move away from what Thomas Kent calls "genre teaching," teaching the format for the "bad news letter," for example. Kent goes on, "business writing is destined to move away from [this] narrow view of writing as a set of rules and formulas . . ."(241). But in order stop teaching mere genres, business writing instructors must be armed with a full and rich description of the prose in business. Part of that description must necessarily be an accounting of both the rhetorical and syntactic characteristics of the prose that business writers produce. The figures gathered in this study could be used, in part, to characterize those rhetorical and syntactic characteristics to business writing students.

In turn, business writing students could use these figures to examine their own writing to determine their writing's fingerprint. But are such analyses useful to students?

Edward Corbett in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student and Margaret Ashida and Leslie Whipp in an article in College English both outline a procedure for students to first analyze the prose of others, which serve as models, and then to analyze their own writing to determine aspects like sentence length, words per paragraph, as well as other characteristics. Corbett

found that students who analyzed the prose of others and their own were "aided in developing [their] own style..." (458). Corbett concluded that close analysis helped students understand how the author produces the effect he or she desires, arguing that close analysis helps students "improve" their writing styles (450). On a similar note, Ashida and Whipp found that students went about the analyses with "apostolic fervor" as students completed an abbreviated version of the Corbett analysis. Ashida and Whipp found that students made "improvement" in such areas as "development of thought, in the coherence of the writing [and] in the manipulation of syntax for rhetorical effect" (21). I have found that when I conducted similar analyses using my figures that students learned a great deal about their own writing, information they could use to improve their ability to express themselves in business prose.

This emphasis on teaching compositional skills is especially important in light of a study by Anita Bednar and Robert Olney who found in their survey of 1987 business school graduates that "university business schools must seek to insure that there graduates are competent in oral and written communication" (22). In particular, of the recent graduates surveyed, 50% listed preparation in written communication as "mandatory," while another 31.3% listed training in written communication as "very important." Significantly, respondents named "written communication" in any form as being so important, but they did not mention training in writing certain genres.

Focusing on one particular form of written communication,

Pamela Rooney and Eileen Evans found that studying annual reports in the classroom provided students with a clearer understanding of how to meet the audience's needs. Students were able to spot places in the report where writers did not communicate clearly with their audiences and to make suggestions about "how the structure and language of content may be shaped to suit the needs of the primary audience" (8).

Finally, my study could prove useful to writers of annual reports, for it is the first detailed study of the prose of successful annual reports. Readability formulae have often been used to "guide" the writers of corporate reports and "measure" the level of difficulty of those documents. As Jack Selzer has stated, however, readability formulae are based on factors not necessarily related to effective writing like the number of syllables per hundred words (23-34). The figures of my study provide thirty other factors that affect the reader's comprehension of a successful annual report.

As important as business writing is to the life of the world, we still have much to learn about how business writing "works." Perhaps, my study will help future writers and students to better understand one aspect of writing at work.

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